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Library Marketplace Interview -- Self Publish or Perish: How one Author Moved from Self Publishing to the Mainstream

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Interview Matthew Bruccoli
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Writers keep writing. New writers keep emerging. New literatures keep developing. But another 50 regular **DLB volumes** should make it substantially complete. We particularly want to maintain the **DLB Documentary volumes** and to make them selectively available in trade paperback format after publication in the **DLB**. Six **Documentary volumes** have been reprinted as paperbacks.

I am disappointed by the meager advice that I have received from reference librarians. I want to know how the **DLB** can be modified to make it more useful for their parishioners. Books are the most valuable and enduring products of a people. It follows that the lives of writers are of permanent interest to serious readers.

ATG: Tell us more about *Bruccoli Clark Layman*.

MJB: Richard Layman, my former graduate student, was the first **Bruccoli Clark** employee. He is now the vice-president of **BCL**. We have 45 employees in Columbia, most of whom are responsible for editing, vetting, checking, and proofing **DLB** entries. **BCL** invests considerable time and money in getting it right.

Bruccoli Clark Layman's work is not limited to **DLB volumes**. Series produced for **Gale** by **BCL** and its **Manly, Inc.** imprint include *American Decades*, *World Eras*, *History in Dispute*, and the *Gale Study Guides*. We also produce reference works for other publishers, including *Facts on File*, *ProQuest*, and *Omni*.

ATG: What comments do you have about on demand publishing and eBooks?

MJB: I welcome demand publishing as a way to resuscitate books and to publish unprofitable books. But I regard online reference tools and "virtual libraries" with suspicion. Most of the online reference sources

that I have consulted are untrustworthy. The online products that originated as online projects are crap-shoots. Many are peppered with factual errors because they do not seem to have been vetted or even checked. Nonetheless, librarians seem to prefer online reference tools. The great advantages of online publishing are ease of access and instant correction. The obvious solution is that major reference works should be available in print and online — as is the **DLB**.


ATG: What has been the impact of consolidation in publishing?

MJB: The consolidation and conglomeratization of publishers and publishing worries the hell out of me because American publishing is now controlled by accountants and business-school types: not by book-people. The executives in charge don't value authors except as money-makers. They are competing for the next meretricious blockbuster. **Mary Lee Settle** has observed that "a whole industry depends on us and treats us like ____." **Random House**, which was started by **Bennett Cerf** and **Donald Klopfer** in 1925 because they loved being publishers, was known as an authors' house. It is now a cartel owned by **Bertelsmann** that requires two pages of **LMP** to list its divisions and sub-divisions. **Mr. Cerf** and **Mr. Klopfer** would not be able to get into the building now. And there is the sad decline of **Charles Scribner's Sons** — the house of **Maxwell Perkins**, **Fitzgerald**, **Hemingway**, and **Wolfe** — now an imprint of **Simon & Schuster**, which is a division of **Viacom**.

ATG: We understand that you and your wife are big antique collectors. How do you spend your spare time? What do you like to read? Have you donated some of your collections to libraries?

MJB: My wife and I are not antique collectors, but she has a magnificent dollhouse furnished with 19th-century furniture and miniature books. We spend our "spare time" — which is not spare time — in book shops.

Booking is not a hobby. Bookmanship is my way of life. **Arlyn** reads more than I do. Apart from research reading, I enjoy reading spy novels on plane trips, but they keep turning into collections.

We have given most of our book collections to university libraries, including the **Matthew J. and Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald** and the **Joseph M. Bruccoli Great War Collection** — both at the **Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina**. These have their own published catalogues. Other collections that we have donated to the **University of South Carolina** in memory of **Dean of Libraries George Terry** are described in *22 Collections* (**Thomas Cooper Library**, 2005). We have also donated collections to **UVa** (**Wyllie, Bowers, and WWI**) and to **Kent State University** (**O'Hara, Lardner, and Chandler**). There are no shelves in a coffin. 

Addendum to Interview — In late 2005, after this interview was conducted, **Gale** decided to discontinue book publication of the **DLB** in 2007 and convert it to online publication only. **Gale** is responding to diminishing library orders for the **DLB**: librarians presumably prefer **DLB** online. I have discussed the impending death of reference books — not just **DLB** — with librarians; they have informed me that:

- 1) Teachers no longer make library research assignments.
- 2) Students do not use the library. They complain that libraries are "icky."

Some reference librarians apparently do not understand that **DLB volumes** are planned and published as complete separate volumes — with the exception of a few two-volume or three-volume sets — that cover a period or genre or movement or national literature. Librarians can purchase the **DLB volumes** they require. — **MJB**

Library Marketplace Interview — Self Publish or Perish: How one Author Moved from Self Publishing to the Mainstream

An Interview with Gregory Desilet author of *Our Faith in Evil* and *Cult of the Kill: Traditional Metaphysics of Rhetoric, Truth, and Violence in a Postmodern World*

Column Editor: **John Riley** (Sales Director, Eastern Book Company) <jdriley@comcast.net>

Column Editor's Note: Self-publishing has been flourishing ever since new print on demand (POD) technologies have given authors the ability to print copies of their works as they sell, rather than maintaining a cumbersome inventory. It has gained new re-

spectability in recent years because of the quality of the content and the professionalism of the production. We'll be exploring those themes in this interview. Before we begin, it is useful to remind ourselves that **William Faulkner** and **Mark Twain** can both

be counted among the self-published!

Gregory Desilet is the author of two books, the first one self-published, and his most recent, *Our Faith in Evil*, just released by **McFarland**. He will walk us through his

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experience and point out some of the pitfalls and opportunities that lie in the path of the self-published author. I hope that his experience interests any of our readers who have an inner author they want to unleash. In addition I hope to alert acquisitions librarians to some of these self-publishing enterprises as they begin to out produce the commercial presses. — JR

JR: How did you come to self-publish your first book *Cult of the Kill: Traditional Metaphysics of Rhetoric, Truth, and Violence in a Postmodern World*?

GD: In discussions with a couple of friends, one of whom is a professor in a university communication department, the idea came up that I should take several essays I had written (some of which had been published in an academic journal), all dealing with related themes, and pull them together into a collection, give them an explanatory introduction, and publish them as a book. This would make them more accessible and relevant as material that could be used in rhetorical and communication theory classes as well as in classes related to literary theory. This idea became more attractive to me over time and I finally did the work, wrote a book proposal outlining what I had to offer, and sent it off to an academic press I thought might be interested. This press rejected the offer so I sent it off to another and so on, receiving rejections from about a dozen presses. Initially I aimed high with **Cambridge** (North America Branch), **Yale**, and **Cornell**, then pinned my hopes on **Ohio**, **Nebraska**, and **Northwestern** (now defunct), and finally on smaller university presses such as **SUNY**, **South Carolina**, and **Alabama**. They all expressed a certain admiration for the idea and the substance but the standard explanation for rejection went something like this: We appreciate your interest in our press, but we're afraid your project doesn't fit with the lists on which we're currently working. Not fitting with the list was, for the most part, the universal refrain. Only later did I learn that this language of rejection was more or less a polite camouflage. The more substantial reason was that I lacked a sufficiently viable and broad platform for launching the book. Because I was neither a university professor nor a person of significant regional or national celebrity, I lacked a ready-made channel for potential marketing (i.e., a platform). This deficiency makes it difficult for the academic presses, all of which operate on tight budgets, to take the financial risk of publishing the book. The chances are good they will lose money. But since I did have a small group of people interested in the creation of my book, I decided not to give up.

JR: How did you find **Xlibris**?

GD: During the time I was sending out proposals to academic presses, I received a

brochure in the mail from **Xlibris**. I found their information interesting and filed it away. After receiving more rejections, I made the decision to try the self-publishing route. I looked at a few other self-publishing companies but decided on **Xlibris** (even though they were not the least expensive) because they were a subsidiary of **Random House**. I assumed that being a subsidiary of a larger corporation might give **Xlibris** deeper pockets than other competitors and that they might stay in business where others might fail. This was an important consideration for me because one of the prime advantages of self-publishing is that the book will stay in print for as long as the company is in business. And I wanted the book to continue to be available even though it might only sell a few copies a year. To this point in time that decision has paid off because **Xlibris** is still in business, even though having gone through a tightening of the belt period in which many of their operations were moved to the Philippines.

Other presses I considered before deciding on **Xlibris** included the other two of the big three print-on-demand presses **iUniverse** and **AuthorHouse**. **iUniverse** is also owned by a large corporation **Barnes and Noble**. Their basic service plan was comparable to **Xlibris** in price, around \$500 (at the time), and included doing the page layout, offering some design work, procuring an ISBN number, registering for copyright, and listing with the major online booksellers like **amazon.com**, **barnesandnoble.com**, and **booksamillion.com**. The royalty to authors, however, was 10% of net, now a common arrangement with many commercial publishers, as opposed to **Xlibris**' 10% of the retail price of the book. Using the net price (based on prices to wholesalers) can sometimes mean less than half of the retail price, so this is a substantial difference. And, like many traditional publishers, **iUniverse** acquires rights to the published work whereas **Xlibris** acquires no rights and offers a non-exclusive agreement. With **Xlibris**, if an author wanted, he or she could publish simultaneously with another company. The **iUniverse** royalty can rise to 20% if the author chooses to decrease the discount offered to various sellers, say from 35% to 20%, but this creates the downside that many sellers will not want to stock or sell the book because they will not make enough profit on it. **iUniverse** touted one advantage over its competition by offering authors the possibility of its **Star Program**, which earns a book the special treatment of being stocked in **Barnes and Noble** stores. But entrance into this program must pass the approval of an editorial board and only about one percent (or less) of the books published through **iUniverse** succeed in passing that hurdle.

AuthorHouse was and remains the largest of the print-on-demand self-publishing presses with currently over 30,000 titles listed on **amazon.com** (**Xlibris** is next with over 18,000 and then **iUniverse** with over 17,000). Their basic service was around \$700 but this did not include copyright registering, for

which they add another \$150 (its only a \$30 value). This package also did not include design and cover artwork. **AuthorHouse** was similar to **iUniverse** in its royalty payments, holding to the 10% of net guideline. All told, at the time I was evaluating the choices, **Xlibris** appeared to be the best option. But it would probably repay any author who puts the time into the research to check on the current contract, policies, and deals being offered by the three major print-on-demand presses as well as any new presses emerging in this growing marketplace.

JR: What was your experience with them?

GD: The people at **Xlibris**, at least at the time I worked with them in 2002, were a pleasure to work with. Everything they said they would do, they did. And I incurred no expenses beyond what they initially said I would have to pay for the services they provided. These services included reviewing my **MS Word** electronic file, converting it to a PDF book page layout, and then allowing me to make copy-editing changes over a series of three or four rounds of editing. Through this process most of the typos and other errors were eliminated. Although **Xlibris** offers graphic art service for cover design, I chose to design my own cover. They took my **Photoshop** document and brought it to reality on the book cover exactly the way I intended for it to appear. Doing my own cover art saved me money and I appreciated having that option. The front and back cover also went through two or three editing steps. When the book was finalized, **Xlibris** filed copyright papers with the **United States Copyright Office**, secured a **Library of Congress** registration number, an ISBN number, and opened distribution channels through **Ingram** as well as releasing the book through **Amazon.com**, **Barnes & Noble**, and **Borders** Websites. Now the book can be found on dozens of national and international bookseller Websites. And, since I chose to upgrade my package to the Professional level, **Xlibris** also issued the book in paperback and hardback versions. The turnaround time from providing the finished manuscript to holding the book in my hand was approximately five months.

The advantage of speed here becomes apparent when comparing that turnaround time to the average period of 10-12 months production time for the traditional publishing process. For an additional amount authors can have **Xlibris** perform other marketing steps such as press releases, emailing operations, and book review solicitations. But I chose to handle this side of the marketing myself, since I already had email lists and other avenues to pursue for marketing the book. And, from what I have learned from other sources, the marketing approaches offered by print-on-demand self-publishing presses often do not generate a substantial increase in book sales.

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JR: *What are your thoughts on "peer review" vis-à-vis self-published books?*

GD: I think that modes of publication that pass through some significant form of peer review remain the preferred way of getting published, both because peer acknowledgment is an important, if not treasured, experience of validation for an author and because it provides potential readers with an assurance that what they are reading has at least passed some fairly rigorous quality tests. For these reasons books that have passed through a peer review process can generally be marketed more successfully than books that have not. Having said that, there are, of course, dozens of stories about authors who have later become famous after having been rejected by the large institutional publishing houses/places that are supposed to know a winner when they see it and who obviously failed in making the right evaluation. So, at the end of the day, it must be admitted that the improved means for self-publishing that have emerged with the print-on-demand technology of the last couple of decades is doubtless a good thing insofar as it makes it easier for new authors to get their work noticed and read work that may prove to be of high quality and beyond the current discriminating capabilities or risk-taking means of status quo editors. And it should be added that much of the stigma that used to be attached to self-published books has diminished in the last decade or so. This is largely a result of increased appreciation in professional circles and among potential authors for how the economics of publishing constrains publishers and limits their choices. The relatively new print-on-demand technology has made it possible to publish quality books that in times past would not have been published due solely to the financial pressures faced by publishers. And some authors who could get published by a traditional press nevertheless choose the self-publishing route because they see they can receive higher royalties and thereby earn more revenue over the long term on books they know they can market successfully themselves.

JR: *Would you recommend self-publishing as a way into print to others?*

GD: I would recommend self-publishing to others but with the caveat that self-publishing be chosen as an avenue for nonfiction only if you have identified and confirmed a target audience that you know will be inter-

ested in your work because of your experience, expertise, or unique qualifications for writing on the given subject. This remains true also for writers of fiction, poetry, and other artistic forms. When you begin to think about publishing, have a specific audience or group in mind that will take an interest in your published work and provide a basis for launching it. This group can be fairly small but it will help greatly in getting your work noticed through word of mouth, especially the electronic mouth of the Internet. Friends and colleagues can forward information about your book to those on their email lists who might be interested in your book's subject.

If I had it to do over again, however, I would not issue the book in both paperback and hardcover versions. I wanted the hardcover version available to libraries because it will hold up better. But it turned out that Xlibris offers only a 20% discount on hardcover books to wholesalers (business-to-business only), resellers (bookstores), and libraries whereas they offer a 40% discount on paperback books to resellers and libraries and a 50% discount to wholesalers. Libraries will prefer to order the paperback and rebind it rather than pay significantly more for the hardcover version (which, in my opinion, turned out not bound well enough to meet library standards anyway).

Regarding self-marketing the book, launching an author Website can be a valuable promotional step even if your book has a page on your press' Website. Here you can provide additional information about your book as well as posting comments from others who are qualified to review your work. This helps to mitigate some of the disadvantages arising from not having gone through the peer review process. You can also provide links to other Websites relevant to your subject and then solicit these sites to return the favor by providing a link to your site. Including a link to your publisher at the bottom of each Web page makes it easy for visitors to order your book directly (which, with most print-on-demand publishers, yields a larger royalty for you). Text on your Website will also attract the attention of search engines and lead Web surfers to your site seeking the kind of information or entertainment provided in your book.

In addition to the Website it is also possible, especially in the case of books relevant to university communities, to create email lists targeting key professors in departments related to your work. This can be done by visiting university departmental Websites to

find contact information. And most disciplines have listserv networking services through which announcements regarding your book can be made to a large group of participants. These listservs can often be found by contacting professional organizations serving university communities.

With the construction of a Website and intensive use of the Internet, it becomes possible to personally perform marketing feats that were not possible ten or twenty years ago. Having said that, however, it must be quickly added that dreams of getting rich by writing and selling books through self-publishing will likely remain dreams. Even through expert use of the Internet, it is difficult to sell a few hundred books and very rare to sell more than that. It is best to think of self-publishing as an adjunct to other career activities or as a stepping stone to broader celebrity and bigger book deals with publishers who have major distribution channels and marketing clout. Significant sales and royalties in book publishing generally come only after an author has already achieved celebrity or been lucky enough to land a contract with a major commercial publisher. Rare is the case that a self-published book creates celebrity through miraculous sales.

JR: *How did your self-publishing help you when it came time to approach another publisher with your new book?*

GD: My experience with self-publishing actually helped me to begin work on my new book. Generally authors serious about getting published begin a new writing project by approaching a publisher with a formal book proposal, consisting of an introduction, an overview, a statement of mission and platform, a promotional plan, an author bio, an outline, and a sample chapter. If the publisher likes the idea and the sample chapter and offers a contract, then a writer can begin work on the project with confidence that it will be published. Without a contract, a writer cannot be certain that the time and effort put into a book project will result in publication and that lack of certainty can often lead to a lack of motivation to even begin. In the case of my second book I had developed a passionate interest in the question of the effects of violent entertainment and knew I wanted to write on the subject. With my experience in self-publishing I felt confident to proceed without commitment from a publisher because I knew that if after putting months of work into the book and not finding a publisher I could always fall back upon the self-publishing option. In short, I knew that two years (as it turned out) of work on the book would not end up as a pile of papers in a drawer with a stack of rejection slips on top. Confidence in the self-publishing option released me to apply my creative energy to the project and to do it precisely the way I wanted to do it without consideration for tailoring it to the point of view of publishers with their intense focus on marketability and risk assessment. On nearing completion of the book, I did a formal proposal and sent it sequen-

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Books by Gregory Desilet Discussed in this Interview:

Cult of the Kill: Traditional Metaphysics of Rhetoric, Truth, and Violence in a Postmodern World. Xlibris Corporation. 2004. ISBN 1-4010-6347-0 (pb) \$22.99. ISBN 1-4010-6348-9 (hb) \$32.99.

Our Faith in Evil: Melodrama and the Effects of Entertainment Violence. McFarland & Co. 2006. ISBN 0-7864-2348-x (pb) \$32.00.

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tially to four carefully selected publishers, one of which was recommended to me by a friend in the academic community. Three of these publishers expressed interest but could not currently offer a contract. The fourth, **McFarland Press**, offered a contract and was especially interested because the book was by then completed and ready to enter the process toward production. As I learned later, for new authors it is often easier to break into traditional publishing with a completed manuscript. A publisher who may be interested after seeing the sample chapter can then see more of the work and move to a decision without waiting. Sometimes this can mean the difference between getting a contract or not because a publishers' needs can change in a relatively short period of time. So, in sum, the self-publishing option enables new authors to embark on writing projects with greater assurance their efforts will not go for naught while also giving them a sense of freedom to write the book they want to write without having to give primary consideration to current marketing and financial constraints faced by publishers.

JR: *How has the experience of getting published by McFarland differed from your self-publishing experience?*

GD: Answering this question requires giving some background information. **McFarland Press** is a well-established privately owned press that publishes books primarily for library and academic markets. Some of these books turn out to be of interest

to a fairly broad section of the general public but **McFarland's** distribution channels and marketing budget correspond in some respects to that of many university-owned academic presses. This means they do not have the resources to promote a book nationally through the major bookstore chains. And because small presses and academic publishers often do not print enough of a particular title to lower the off-set printing costs sufficiently to permit large discounts to wholesalers and resellers, major bookstores usually will not stock these titles. It can be difficult for bookstores to sell these titles in any quantity, and, even if they were to sell a few, the profit margins are very narrow. Consequently, being published by an academic press or a small commercial press does not mean that an author is guaranteed substantial book sales. Sales may be in some cases similar to sales that might have been achieved through self-publishing. And the royalties are usually set according to the 10% of net (rather than 10% of retail) guideline. For these reasons, aside from the initial production cost to the author incurred with self-publishing packages, publishing in the traditional way may not translate into a significant financial advantage over self-publishing. However, advantages of traditional publishing emerge in other ways. The traditional way offers a measure of peer review and the corresponding satisfaction of peer approval, a thorough copy editing process, the talents of a full service design and graphic arts department, the benefits of a marketing department and a promotional budget, and established distribution channels all at no cost to the author. However, an author who wants to promote his or

her book beyond the limited channels and resources of a small press must still invest a considerable amount of personal time and energy in order to boost book sales. But the promotional knowledge gained through the self-publishing experience makes it easier to see where and how to begin taking these steps. In my own case, for starters, this has meant expanding my personal Website, initiating local speaking and signing events, and approaching local newspapers in the attempt to create a local base of recognition from which to build toward a wider market. All things considered, publishing with a small press is perhaps more similar to self-publishing than many might suspect, but it does carry enough advantages to make the search for a traditional publisher worth the effort.

JR: *What is your next project?*

GD: The next project will be to complete a novel for which I already have a rough draft. All my previous work has been nonfiction and the step into fiction brings with it not only new challenges from a creative and artistic point of view but also the significantly different challenge of approaching editors/publishers specializing in fiction. I am told that writers serious about selling their fiction to a publisher ought to get a literary agent. In fact, what I have learned suggests that most editors will not even look at a fiction manuscript that does not come from an agent. So it seems that the first step in publishing fiction requires selling yourself and your work to an agent. This is no easy task because good agents often have a full load of clients (I have already been rejected by two New York agents for

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From the Reference Desk
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Bernan Press has released the 3rd edition of **Peggy Garvin's *United States Government Internet Manual: 2005-2006*** (2006, 1598880047, \$59). A handy reference work that lists the URLs and descriptions of over 2000 government Websites, this book offers a convenient way to pinpoint relevant government information. New to this edition are a brief index to Spanish language Websites and a small section "summarizing new government Websites" called, *what to watch for in 2006*.

Of course, all of this is on the Web and there are Web gateways like the **Federal Web Locator** and **FirstGov** that provide access. But having the URLs of more than 2000 quality sites, with thorough descriptions of their content, all nicely indexed in an easy-to-use format makes this title worth considering. 🐼

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this reason) and are generally only interested in authors who demonstrate excellent potential for producing more than one book (and therefore agents want to see more than one idea you are working on). Although I can't be certain yet, it's quite possible that publishing fiction may prove to be considerably more difficult than publishing nonfiction. So once again the self-publishing option may be called upon to come to the rescue. By the time an author learns all the wrinkles of writing and publishing in various genres, he or she will no doubt have acquired a few grey hairs and a lot of rejection slips. In the end, what I think this means is that those who have found their way into publication, whether by the traditional way or the self-publishing way, show a great love for writing combined with a lot of perseverance. 🐼

Greg's work can be previewed at his Website at www.gregorydesilet.com (including a sample of his novel in progress). He can also be contacted through his Website.

Book Reviews
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reader is drawn into the world of collaboration within the academic library. Each of the four chapters emphasizes a specific type of collaboration — peer, internal, external, and collaboration between librarian and faculty. At first, the reviewer wondered why so much was written before the academic library was brought into the scheme of things. It is ap-

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parent, though, the authors needed to establish clarity and definition about collaboration before they could speak to it specifically. The format for these chapters is straightforward. There is a brief overview defining the type of collaboration. This is followed by an example of a collaborative group and a "case narrative." In the end, questions are presented to the reader for further reflection. The reviewer's favorite case narrative concerned planning a library-wide party. Such an example may appear trite, but many readers

have experienced difficulty planning activities that genuinely bolster group morale and well being.

A few final words. Administrators would be well-served reading this book. The publisher may be British, but the authors are all from North Carolina and write from the perspective on this side of the Pond. Each chapter is followed by a significant bibliography. Despite the hefty price, this might become required reading for anyone who feels that "two (or more) heads are better than one." 🐼